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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the three phases in the evolution of the Mount Royal College (Canada) Learning Assistance Program, beginning with the clinical approach (1969), moving to a credited class structure (1970), and finally to the present non-credit workshop approach (1971). The Learning Assistance Program was established to help students needing assistance in basic skill areas such as reading, writing, listening, and mathematics. The workshop approach has had the highest student retention rate of any of the alternatives tried. Students entering the program are given diagnostic tests to determine their learning difficulty, then given the choice of three alternative learning styles: individual, independent, and group. Programmed learning packages are being developed, and an intern program utilizing students from a nearby university has increased the staff available to help st dents in the program. (Author/LP)

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THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNING ASSISTANCE IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

The Evolution of Learning Assistance in a Community College

describes the three phases in the evolution of the Mount Royal College Learning Assistance Program beginning with a clinical approach (1969), moving to a credited class structure (1970), and finally to the present non-credit workshop approach (1971). Since many students in the community college need assistance in basic skill areas such as reading, writing and listening, Learning Assistance is presently functioning as a support system striving to help satisfy these expressed needs. This paper deals with the concerns, problems, programming, evaluation and modifications of such a program.

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THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNING ASSISTANCE IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Mount Royal College, located in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, is a two year, open door, community college offering one year certificate programs, two year diploma programs, and university transfers, to any student over the age of 18. As is the case in every community college, students come with a vast divergency in age, skills, and previous educational experiences. For this reason, the Educational Development Services, traditionally referred to as the 'Counselling Center' has assumed an active role in assisting students both academically and personally to adapt to the community college.

Recognizing the fact that many students have not been in an academic environment for many years prior to coming to Mount Royal College and realizing that a great many students attend Mount Royal College because they are unable to gain admittance to university, Educational Development Services anticipated that these students would need additional support beyond that which is available from the classroom setting. The Learning Assistance Program was thus established in 1969 to satisfy the need for academic and personal support.

In the fall of the 1969-70 academic year, the Learning Assistance Program was clinical in nature. Academic advisors and counsellors suggested learning assistance to students whose Davis Reading and English Co-op Test scores were in the bottom quartile according to Mount Royal College norms. In addition, students who were keenly interested in improving their reading and study skills were directed toward the Learning Assistance Program.

Initially each student was interviewed by a learning assistance counsellor. According to the student's wishes and the learning assistance

counsellor's assessment of the student's need, individual programs were established. The students were monitored and progress assessed periodically. Independent study was done in the learning lab where resources such as filmstrips, programmed texts, tapes, slides, reading machines, etc. were housed.

This individualized and independent study approach to learning assistance exhibited both strengths and weaknesses. The major strength lay in the individual contact. However, because of an excessive client load, learning assistance counsellors found it difficult to properly monitor the students. Each student was left virtually on his own with a minimal amount of significant feedback even though these low-achieving students probably required more extensive feedback and reinforcement than other students. Thus, many student problems were not successfully resolved and drop-out rate was high.

1970-71 Fall Semester

During the first semester of the 1970-71 school year, the Learning Assistance Program of Educational Development Services offered English 104-Learning Assistance, a corrective course leading to the improvement of basic reading, writing, and study skills. Before registration, all entering Mount Royal College students were given a series of placement tests aimed at assessing reading and English ability. The results of those tests were forwarded to academic advisors who assisted students in class selection. In terms of test scores and the apparent need for assistance, academic advisors suggested that certain students enroll in English 104-Learning Assistance.

Upon entering English 104-Learning Assistance, students were given

further diagnostic exercises to determine reading rate and composition skills. After these diagnostic tests have been evaluated by the learning assistance counsellor, an individualized program was established for each student. The student's expectations and the learning assistance counsellor's assessment of student need determined the type of program given to each student. Students then established objectives in specific skill areas. As the needs of students ranged from writing to listening, to various aspects of reading, their programs varied greatly.

Each student was given a personal file which was kept in the learning lab. This file contained the student's program sheet and his progress sheet which he was to maintain on a daily basis. The learning assistance counsellor could then pull the file and readily note a student's progress.

The English 104-Learning Assistance class carried three Mount Royal College credits. Students were asked to attend two one-hour classes per week and one one-hour tutorial session per week. One session per week was an instructional period concerning one of the skills listed below:

1. Controlled Reader - for motivation and to help eliminate mechanical deficiencies such as regression, and word by word reading.
2. Cracking A Textbook.
3. Approaching A Chapter - SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) and Modification SPRF (Survey, Purpose, Read, Follow-up).
4. Application of SPRF - Mini Cue Note Taking.
5. Effective Study.
6. Listening Effectively.
7. Note-taking From Readings and Lectures.
8. Writing Essay Exams.
9. Writing Objective Exams.

10. Reading Flexibility and Concentration.

11. Writing a Research Paper - Use of the Library.

During the second weekly session, these skills were reinforced in independent study wherein students attempted to apply acquired techniques to either lab materials or to their own textbooks. The third weekly hour was used for tutorial sessions directed by an Educational Development Services counsellor and assisted by a Learning Assistance Program counsellor. The purpose of the tutorial varied according to the wishes of the group members. Some of the groups were informational while others were self-exploratory or encounter in nature. In several of these, sensitivity or micro-labs were held.

At the end of the semester, personal interviews were again scheduled to examine student progress. Students were asked to evaluate their progress in terms of objectives they had established for themselves at the beginning of the semester. These self-evaluations, together with the learning assistance counsellor's reactions to them, served as the basis for the student's final marks.

Evaluative comments concerning the program itself reflected approval of the independent study approach of the class. The freedom to work at one's own rate without pressure to conform to group standards seemed to elicit the most predominant positive comment. The tutorials were a point of much discussion. Some students did not participate in tutorials and were therefore unable to evaluate them. From those students who did take an active part in tutorials, comments were positive. Apparently tutorials afforded an opportunity to discuss ideas and feelings without fear of judgement - again, a positive comment on the freedom involved in the session.

Although English 104-Learning Assistance met with some success, the

following limitations were evidenced. One limitation was the negative attitude which seemed to exist among the students. They seemed to feel that they had been singled out as "dumb-dumbs" compared to students enrolled in the basic English composition course in the English department. The other major limitation was the shortage of time and resources. Students who were directed to English 104-Learning Assistance demanded a great deal of individual attention. Even though there were two learning assistance counsellors available on days when students were working independently, it was virtually impossible to meet the time demands of each student. Due to the lack of attention, feedback, and immediate guidance, some students failed to identify and overcome their specific skill deficiencies; others lost interest as the semester progressed. Part of this problem also was the shortage of equipment. Students commented frequently on this during the evaluation interviews. Much time was wasted waiting for equipment such as tape recorders, controlled readers, or record players which were essential aids to many of their programs. It became obvious that the major limitation of the developmental class approach to learning assistance was directly related to the time element. Conclusion: "instructing" 20 to 25 is possible; offering "learning assistance" to that number is not.

1970-71 Spring Semester

The 1970-71 approach to learning assistance was a modification of a class approach. It attempted to overcome the two major weaknesses of the credited class approach, namely student perception of the course as one for "dumb-dumbs" and that of classes being too large to ensure individualization and availability of facilities. Therefore, the Learning Assistance Program

instituted VOLUNTARY NON-CREDIT WORKSHOPS in Reading/Study Skills and in Writing. The workshops were small groups which met bi-weekly for seven weeks. During the seven weeks, a considerable amount of time was devoted to individual work which supplemented the group work and assisted each student in transferring the study techniques to actual course work.

The workshops drew students from a number of different sources. Since academic advising and entrance testing were no longer compulsory, posters and discussions with student societies were used as a means of advertising the workshops. However, some students were referred by advisors, as well as by counsellors and instructors.

At the beginning of each workshop, new students were orientated to learning assistance. Students expressed their expectations and were exposed to the expectations of the learning assistance instructors. In the Reading/Study Skills workshops, students were required to sign a contract committing a certain number of hours to practicing new techniques on their regular class assignments. Students took a four-minute reading test (Van Wagenen Rate of Comprehension Test) to determine roughly the level at which they were reading. This test, according to tentative local research, appears to be highly correlated with the Co-op Reading Comprehension Test which was used initially.

Since the maximum size for workshops was limited to twelve and five respectively for Reading/Study Skills and Writing, it was possible to effect a strong emphasis on involvement. In Reading/Study Skills workshops, skills related to study habits, preparation for and mechanics of taking exams, and listening effectively were discussed. The members of each writing group analyzed and criticized one another's work with feedback from the learning

assistance counsellor.

In addition to systematic student contact through workshops, learning assistance was incorporated into classroom presentations. For example, a biology instructor invited a learning assistance counsellor to discuss "How to Study A Chapter and Summarize it Effectively" while a business instructor asked for a discussion of reading improvement skills. There was occasional testing of classes and consultation with instructors regarding the range of reading ability in their classes and the level of difficulty of the text material used in that class.

This approach to learning assistance through combined group and individual work appeared satisfactory to students, instructors, and learning assistance counsellors. The Learning Assistance Program was serving more people more efficiently. The drop-out rate in Study Skills workshops was approximately only 20%, while no one dropped out of the smaller writing groups. In addition, students in the groups frequently gave positive evaluative feedback on the value of some of their newly acquired study techniques. Indirectly, positive student feedback was reflected by the "word-of-mouth" advertising which became one of the main sources of information about the service offered by the Learning Assistance Program.

Apart from student reactions, the workshop approach demonstrated several advantages with respect to time. The shorter duration of each session (7 weeks) allowed time for at least three sets of workshops during a semester. This made it possible for a greater number of students to take advantage of learning assistance and allowed students to enroll in both a Writing and a Reading/Study Skills workshop at different times. In addition, there was some time for drop-in appointments which allowed for on-the-spot contact with students who already had completed a workshop but later desired

specific assistance in applying effective study techniques. Such extended contact reinforced student learning and assisted the Educational Development Services in evaluating the effectiveness of the workshop approach in helping students transfer learning skills to students' daily studies.

1971-72

Since the workshop approach to learning assistance has been deemed most successful both in terms of personal efficiency and serving students more effectively, that basic workshop format has been retained. However, the Learning Assistance Program is now offering learning assistance in three alternative learning styles: - individual, independent, and groups. One of the learning assistance counsellors deals solely with students who desire assistance on a one-to-one basis, while the other learning assistance counsellors are offering group sessions and are monitoring students who are working on independent programs.

Most of the students who are working on a one-to-one basis had obtained extremely low scores on the reading test and were offered one-to-one assistance in lieu of group work. Most of these students preferred one-to-one when offered!

Students and faculty are becoming more and more aware of the services offered by the Learning Assistance Program and for this reason many students just "drop-in" or are referred by an instructor or counsellor. When students cannot be placed in a workshop immediately, they are accomodated individually to meet their immediate needs.

This semester learning assistance has expanded to include basic math and listening. Several instructors have requested that their students

participate in the independent listening program as well as in the other workshops. In addition to recommending the workshops, instructors are continuing to take advantage of learning assistance services in areas such as textbook reading level assessments and survey reading achievement in classes. Some instructors also are continuing to request specific topics to be discussed in classes such as "writing an essay exam", "reading more effectively" or "writing a research paper".

Since Mount Royal College is moving toward the Stanley-Leggett model of individualized independent study, emphasis is being placed on developing programmed material. For this reason the Learning Assistance Program is beginning to develop learning packages such as SPRF - Survey-Purpose-Read-Follow-up. These packages would allow students to work independently on some of the areas dealt with in the workshops.

Learning assistance this year has instituted an intern program for university students. Graduate students majoring in English and/or Reading are hired to offer assistance to students under direct supervision of a regular learning assistance counsellor. The interns have participated to some extent in existing workshops prior to running their own and have access to the full time counsellor for evaluation. Thus, these university students are gaining valuable guidance and experience while the Learning Assistance Program is serving a larger number of students.

Next semester students who are enrolled in the University of Calgary's "Reading Problems in Secondary Schools" will be offered a practicum situation. These students will gain experience in testing, teaching, and evaluating in the Reading and/or Writing workshops. A similar proposed program will be offered to the Calgary Public School teachers.

Finally, the Learning Assistance counsellors offer workshops, upon request, to groups of staff members and to groups within the community. For example, the city police department have recently been involved in a reading improvement workshop as part of their recruit training program. Since a community college is aimed at satisfying the needs of the community, it is felt that this segment of the program is extremely vital.

The Learning Assistance Program has evolved due to the rapidly changing demands placed on it by both students and staff. Since these demands will continuously change, the program will continue to be modified to meet the expressed needs of those it serves.